

# *Wrestling Perspective*

• Analysis and Commentary From The McLaughlin Group of Professional Wrestling •

*Paul J. MacArthur and David Skolnick - Editors*

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## *New York Governor Recommends Deregulation of Wrestling... Others To Follow?*

*By - David Skolnick*

Should professional wrestling be regulated by state athletic commissions? That controversial issue is currently being debated on Capitol Hill in New York State. The state is facing a \$6 billion budget deficit and needs to cut costs. Governor Mario Cuomo has proposed, among other things to save money, laying off 7,000 employees, cutting state aid to school districts, closing state parks and deregulating wrestling.

According to the governor's aides, the state could save nearly \$500,000 by deregulating wrestling. Cuomo's proposal calls for half of the state athletic commission's 14 employees to be laid off. Also, the plan, which has not yet been voted on by the State Legislature, calls for the state to no longer regulate boxing participants who are not directly involved with the fights, including ticket takers and vendors.

The WWF, which has been attempting to deregulate pro wrestling state by state, and has been successful in Connecticut, California and Delaware, claims the business is a form of entertainment and not a sport and is in favor of Cuomo's proposal, according to an Associated Press report. WWF spokesman Steve Planamenta said although state athletic commissions check the health of the wrestlers, the WWF does the same. Actually, most state athletic commissions do little except collect money from the wrestling promotions. About half of the country's 50 states regulate wrestling. Besides having a doctor sit at ringside and enjoy the matches, most state athletic commissions are responsible for giving the wrestlers a physical examination, issuing licenses to wrestlers and promoters and approving the matches. In return, most states with athletic commissions charge a five percent gate tax.

In the past 18 months, only two incidents in which a state athletic commission was useful occurred; both in New Jersey. One was prior to the NWA card at the Meadowlands on April 26, 1990, when Legion of Doom member Hawk was barred from competing in a tag team match against Doom. Hawk's pulse rate was reported at 180 and one of his heart valves was blocked. A few months earlier, Tom Robinson, who was going to make his managerial debut, was not permitted to participate at an independent card due to heart problems. Robinson's problems have been well documented and a benefit card was held last year to help defray his medical expenses. Two cases in a span of 18 months and one person had a history of health problems. Although both were serious problems, only two have been documented in the past 18 months. That's not to say other wrestlers do not have health problems and should not be allowed to compete; on the contrary. In fact, if these state appointed doctors were really doing their jobs, several other cases would have occurred during the past 18 months. Look at Andre the Giant, for example. He is in poor health by anyone's standards. He can barely walk, he has trouble breathing and is grossly overweight. Yet, no state athletic commission barred him from wrestling last year. He

was given health exams and issued licenses. Obviously, he was in good enough health for the athletic commissions to allow him to compete. That is a disturbing thought.

The WWF has been fighting for the past few years to deregulate wrestling. Officials from the company have admitted to New Jersey lawmakers that wrestling was a work and should be freed from the state's control. This is one instance in which the WWF may be right. State athletic commissions contribute little in their present form and there is no sign of any improvement. For a long time, the commissions had a great deal of power over wrestling promotions. In both Bruno Sammartino's autobiography and in Jim Freedman's *Drawing Heat*, corrupt, or at least dishonest, athletic commissions and commissioners seemed commonplace both in the United States and Canada. The situation has changed somewhat, but reforms are greatly needed. Remember, wrestling is not a pure sport like boxing. Boxing is dangerous and competitors are taking a serious risk when it comes to being injured or even killed. Wrestlers also take a risk, but the situations are different when you talk about a sport that is a work and another which usually isn't. Yet, both are regulated by state athletic commissions.

Cuomo's plan to deregulate wrestling in New York and eliminate half of the athletic commissioners seems like a step in the right direction. It's unfortunate that people will lose their jobs in the process, but they are not needed and are not needed regardless if the State Legislature accepted or rejected Cuomo's proposal. The WWF has stated it is concerned about its athletes and monitors the health of its wrestlers. One need only look at their athletes to know this isn't true. The likelihood that strict physicals would be given by the WWF or any other wrestling organization, especially small ones on shoe string budgets, to its employees on a regular basis is unlikely. But, it cannot be disputed that the state athletic commissions have been doing a poor job. Unless changes are made, and it is obvious they won't be, the commissions should not be permitted to regulate wrestling. Yes, Cuomo's motive is to save money and not help wrestling. But, if the State Legislature approves his proposal, both would happen and hopefully, other states would follow suit.

## *Sidelines*

Thanks To Wade Keller for the kind words in a recent issue of Torch.

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## Where Have All The Heroes Gone?

By - Rodney Leighton

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About 1972, Country and Western Singer Whispering Bill Anderson put out a song, "Where Have All The Heroes Gone," which was soundly applauded by some and roundly booed by others. In it, Anderson basically bemoaned the fact that many of the people who the youth of the day were admiring were unkept, long haired, not very nice folks. I have no idea if Anderson watches wrestling or not. If he does, he must surely be appalled by the people who are portrayed as heroes to today's youth.

When I first started watching wrestling, circa 1958, "good guys" were just that. People such as Whipper Billy Watson, Dr. Timothy Geohagen and Billy "Red" Lyons were the epitome of the clean cut young man of high ideals and morals. They would only use a closed fist after tremendous provocation and would never dream of resorting to such villainous acts as raking the eyes or striking their opponent with a chair. I am not certain, but I can not recall of there being any wrestlers cheered in those days who used ungentlemanly tactics.

In the late 60's, we began to see a few cases of somewhat unorthodox wrestlers being cheered upon occasion. Dick "Bulldog" Brower certainly could not be considered anyone's image of a hero, but was cheered here and there. The greatest big man ever to put on the trunks, Don Leo Jonathan, was both a hero and a villain. Believe it or not, Maniac Mark Lewin was once a hero. But, these and the few others who fit the category wrestled and acted as the role demanded: as a hero. They wrestled clean, most of the time.

In the mid-70's we began to see the emergence of the "good guy" who had the persona and use the tactics of a villain. How well I remember the turn of the wrestler known as Michael "The Judge" DuBois (known as Alexis Smirnoff in the U.S.). He did not change one solitary thing about his act or his style of wrestling but was lustily cheered. There were a number of others. The Anderson brothers are examples which come to mind.

As we reached the 80's, it seemed that the concept of the "hero" was vanishing in wrestling. More and more fan favorites were people who used brawling tactics, won at all costs and did whatever was necessary. As the decade wore on, more and more "heroes" were guys who had no business being so. As we neared and reached the 90's, more and more were people who shouldn't even be near a ring, except perhaps as a spectator.

One of the things which disturbs me somewhat is the preponderance of wrestlers being portrayed as heroes who use villainous tactics and have, in many ways, villainous personas. They often use disgusting and reprehensible gimmicks to win matches or afterwards. This is somewhat universal, although the WWF is certainly the main offender.

Virtually all of the people known as faces in the WWF do not qualify as heroes. The number one guy, Hulk Hogan, is, in fact, the epitome of an old time villain with his looks, style and especially his consistent usage of such things as eye rakes, closed fists, chairs and the abuse of women. The Ultimate Warrior uses some very obvious satanic characteristics, which I have to wonder about when he is being presented as a hero to children, especially in an age where many teenagers commit suicide due to satanic influences. Jim Duggan almost always uses his board, often to win his match. Jake Roberts uses his snake to his advantage at times and at other times drapes it over a fallen opponent. The Bushwackers use no wrestling whatsoever, and on and on and on.

While it is possible to see some of this in every promotion, the WWF is by far the worst offender, not only due to their excessive usage of such characters, but also and perhaps

more so due to their popularity with young people. I have to wonder very strongly if this is what we wish our children to grow up believing. That, it is fine to do anything, as long as you win. That putting supposedly dangerous snakes on a supposedly unconscious person is a good thing. I hope not and I hope this may cause a few people to do some thinking on this matter.

## The WWF - An Unwilling Coming of Age

By - Vic Stanley

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Are we in the midst of witnessing the decline and fall of Vince McMahon or is it just a painful second adolescence? Is Titan Sports becoming the 90's version of Fritz Von Erich's massive WCCW disaster? Probably not, but times are indeed changing. As in the real world, the wrestling industry is currently in the midst of a recession with no relief in sight. When working people are suddenly confronted with severe budget constraints, the first thing they must sacrifice is the money allotted for entertainment. This translates into lower revenues generated by house shows, PPVs and merchandising. After leading a relatively charmed life throughout the 80's, primarily off the popularity of Hulk Hogan and to a lesser degree, Jesse Ventura, McMahon's managerial acne is beginning to inflame his company's fragile epidermis and he has made some poorly advised and perhaps irrational business decisions in an effort to salvage his floundering enterprise. Today, McMahon is like the child in Peter Pan who was unwilling to accept the inevitability of impending adulthood. After a certain point, the initial cuteness wears thin and the temper tantrums can no longer be tolerated. McMahon and the WWF are presently experiencing an extremely difficult puberty and in this instance, the parent of the spoiled child are the impatient and discontented fans.

Obviously, the WWF is in little danger of imminent financial disaster, but no chairman of the board, McMahon included, desires to see their profit curve arc into a downward spiral because it reflects directly upon their personal decision-making capabilities. Already, some WWF performers have been let go due to the budgeting cutbacks and elimination of "C" level house shows. However, in light of the recent emergence of a few potentially profitable independent promotions, recession aside, employment options for wrestlers are much better than they have been for many years. This is an ironic anachronism in the business when compared to the overall economic situation and it is working to McMahon's detriment. Now, when he offers his disgruntled performers and workers an ultimatum, they can find almost immediate employment offers elsewhere. In some cases, he pays them not to work rather than work for the competition. If he really desires to retain the services of specific person he must negotiate the best mutual offer, not merely make idle threats about never working in the business again.

McMahon may be partially correct in privately claiming that the success of the WWF was more of his doing than that of Hulk Hogan. If Hogan had decided to remain in the AWA, would Verne Gagne have taken his company to comparable success? Probably not. But, on the other hand, would *Gone With the Wind* have been the phenomenon it was if the best leading man they could acquire for the role of Rhett Butler was Boris Karloff or Huntz Hall? Regardless of the directoral genius of David O. Selznick and the unlimited financial resources of MGM, I think not. Behind the scenes savvy is of utmost importance to a successful business venture, but the company must have a quality product to market. The WWF is obviously not a think tank. It is a commercial business and McMahon's primary commodity is Hogan. This being the case, he is currently struggling with the realization that he could possibly lose Hogan to the competition or to the film industry. Champions are born, not made. The sting of this reality was ultimately painful and apparent in 1990.



Much has been said about McMahon being a maniacal corporate dictator and some, such as Ventura, have left their employer rather than put up with him. But what was the reasoning behind some of his recent decisions? His desperate and so far, fruitless search for Hogan's heir apparent has been a primary motive behind his current major programs, particularly the Sgt. Slaughter/Saddam Hussein angle. He seems to be more concerned with the immediate reaction of this storyline, ie. a Wrestlemania VII sellout, than he is for the long-term success of the company. This is a controversy that will be hard pressed to disappear even now that the Gulf War has ended.

McMahon's huge financial investment in the WWF is unlikely to do the same for bodybuilding that the WWF did for wrestling. There simply is not a sufficient market to justify his expenditures since many people do not find bodybuilding entertaining. If he is planning to exploit this venture as breeding ground for future wrestling fodder, this is a very expensive way to go about it. Many insiders reason that a state of the art training school or even the acquisition of a smaller regional promotion would better serve this purpose. If someone as knowledgeable as Joe Weider realizes and accepts the limitations of the bodybuilding industry, what does McMahon know that he doesn't know? Weider's reported negotiations with Ted Turner are yet another thorn in McMahon's side. The competition is gradually gaining momentum on all fronts. The only way WCW can fail to gain momentum is through its own traditional practice of shooting itself in the foot.

McMahon has a considerable pool of talented performers, but through his calculated WWF style of cartoonish presentation, he has greatly limited the opportunity to showcase their abilities. So far, his young audience has been quite content with the status quo product, but are the demographics shifting again? Will the hundred of thousands of returning soldiers and a war weary public seek out wrestling as an outlet for unfulfilled aggressions? Will the childish WWF suffice? Meanwhile, McMahon's aforementioned competitors are scooping up his discards and pushing them to stardom in a slightly more believable fashion. Ten years ago, the WWF style of wrestling was considered to be the wave of the future, but now the fans may be ready for a return to a more traditional version of the sport. A shoot-style approach is something the younger fans have never been exposed to and sadly, in light of current events, it may take a more realistic and violent style to retain their interest. In this regard, McMahon may be missing the boat despite the heat generated by the Slaughter angle. Realistic action is one thing, but portrayed and actual acts of treason are entirely different issues. In light of the real life war we just waged and the fact that real lives were being lost for real causes, the drama of wrestling angles appears rather silly, especially when management attempts to equate the two situations. There is a limit to the premise that even negative publicity is good for business. Lemons cannot always be made into lemonade and at this moment, McMahon should be puckering from the aftertaste.

There are many other aspects of the overall situation to consider before a rosy scenario can once again be painted for the WWF and the industry in general. The subject of steroids and growth hormones, recreational drug use and AIDS will have significant effects on the business which are now only beginning to come to light. What will happen when the first documented case of a blade related AIDS infection is revealed? Steroid abuse has already been linked to the serious illness and subsequently death of one wrestler. Tragically, this is only the tip of the iceberg. Wrestling will have to rise above its self imposed-standards.

I am not advocating a proliferation of renewed graphic violence in wrestling. I have always been ambivalent about many aspects of the sport. I just wonder where the current world events will take all of us. I am looking forward to the day when McMahon's tasteless angles are the most controversial issues we have to ponder. At least no one's lives and deaths will be exploited by greedy promoters. We will all survive, as will wrestling, but it will not be without casualties. Hopefully we can all come out of this a little wiser and not much worse for wear.

## Letters To The Editors

Enjoyed your latest issue and have some comments regarding it. First off, there is no comparison between news services and the WWF in regards to war exploitation. News services' specific jobs are to cover the news. The war is still the biggest news story there is. Most television stations and networks (CNN being the exception) have actually lost money because of decreased ad revenues and employees' overtime hours and added expenses in war coverage. Even CNN has gone way over budget, but in the long run, the war will prove to be profitable for them most likely because it gave the network added visibility that should carry over in the long run.

The WWF is not the worst exploiter of the war in the entire world. It is just one of many. The WWF shouldn't be singled out by the news media as the only ones doing it, nor should it be ignored for doing so. However, within the wrestling business, it is only the real exploiter. While WCW has had questionable television commercials, the fact is nobody would have said a word about it in the mainstream press had not the WWF gone overboard in its war exploitation angle. No other promotion has touched it, and, not that this is a justification, all were in worse financial straits at the time. As far as the general media goes, I've seen news reports decrying people doing Desert Storm T-shirt business (and a percentage of the profits is going to charities helping families in many of the cases, which is not meant as a justification, but it is something McMahon hasn't done), Topps Chewing Gum, etc. just as wrestling has been criticized. Football, which hardly exploited the war to the degree wrestling did, was far more heavily criticized in the national media for doing so than wrestling, mainly because football (the Super Bowl in particular) is so much more visible and popular than wrestling.

There is an apt comparison of wrestling to the movies except for one major difference. Pro wrestling pretends to be real. The only time it doesn't is when there is money to be made in admitting the truth (ie. hearings to eliminate commissions). The Slaughter angle is different than John Wayne movies because John Wayne never pretended what he was doing was anything more than acting in the movies. Hulk Hogan is pretending to be real. He is trying to give the illusion that he and Slaughter are part of this war to young children. I've never heard of John Wayne or Bob Hope doing USO tours, and then using clips of the tours they made as real people and using them in advertising packages to promote their upcoming movies that they were pretending weren't movies but the real thing. Hulk Hogan and Vince McMahon did that.

First off, in my own case, I've never defended using xenophobic angles or racial angles. They are all in poor taste. And when Bill Watts did them, he was criticized for them. Sometimes they drew money, in which case they can be economically justified but that still doesn't make them in any better taste. Other times, like with Korchenko, Watts stubbornly shoved them down people's throats that didn't want to see them (and that angle was really criticized by the way because it didn't draw money).

But, there is a difference between doing an angle years after the hostilities have died down and doing one when the hostilities break. It's a line that pro wrestling never crossed. Never during World War II - only many years after. Never during Korea. Never during Vietnam. While the good taste/bad taste of a xenophobic angle is the same either way, one draws a line when they use kids whose parents are fighting a war and people who are about to be shipped out as a wrestling angle to sell tickets for a wrestling match. That is far worse than the hated foreigner routine which admittedly has always been in bad taste yet has always existed in the wrestling business. While McMahon's visibility, which in part is his success, is a great deal of the reason the general media got on his case, within pro wrestling, I think that's an unfair statement that any criticism in this particular case comes from resentment for his success. Ole Anderson was more heavily criticized than Vince McMahon for doing the same basic racist angle. Why? Was it because more people liked

Vince than Ole? No, it was because Ole revolved the main angle in the promotion around a racial situation. Thus, the angle was more visible. McMahon's (race related) angle was an ancillary angle. In this case, McMahon's angle (Slaughter/Hogan) is the main one in the promotion.

You are right, McMahon should be criticized the same as Watts if Watts did the same angle. Now the question, would Watts? Don't kid yourself, he wouldn't. When he booked in the 1960s, he never used Vietnamese heels. Granted, he used Soviets and Germans, and he absolutely exploited a cold war with the Soviet Union, but he never crossed that line. Jim Ross, whose opinions in most cases are similar to Watts' in that most of his wrestling educations came from Watts, criticized the angle publicly, and was embarrassed to do so because it would come off as criticizing Titan Sports and for anyone from WCW to publicly do that comes off as sour grapes. Yet, he felt strongly enough that he still did it.

I spoke with many people within Titan Sports between January 15 and 19. We didn't talk about moral issues. You can't with people in the wrestling business. We talked about long-term and short-term dollars and cents. We talked about what the reaction of the media and the fans would be and everyone agreed putting the belt on Sarge would be a mistake p.r. wise. As a wrestling angle, I never criticized putting the belt on Sarge. If it was kept within the wrestling world and no war related backdrop was used and real people and real emotions were used as part of a fake television show and a fake pay-per-view show to get over a fake angle weren't used, I'd probably have laughed at some of the more emotional criticisms of McMahon myself. He'd have still been criticized every bit as much by the general media for making an Iraqi champ when the war started and I'd have been against it for the same reason as I'm against all xenophobic angles. But, it would have ended there. Steve Beverly would have been every bit as strong in his commentary and Wade Keller probably would have been. The three of us all have different opinions on aspects of this issue. But we all agreed McMahon was beneath contempt for his overall actions in this case. Nothing that has happened has surprised me or anyone within Titan Sports that I spoke with except for the company trying to use me to camouflage the issue. But it was McMahon who ignored the warnings because he believes he's above it all. It is that belief that cost him the Los Angeles Coliseum and has led to his weak TV ratings (not just on NBC, but lately on syndication and cable as well). In that way, he not only exhibited poor taste, no worse than other people in other businesses, but worse than anyone in the wrestling business right now, but also made an honest business miscalculation.

There is nothing wrong with the latter. Atsushi Onita did the same thing. And he exploited a death, which at the time was breaking ground for the wrestling business as well. But, Onita also had the guts to admit he made a mistake in order to save the company from bad publicity. Vince doesn't have the guts. That is why the company has never publicly faced the issue.

David Meltzer  
Editor - Wrestling Observer Newsletter  
Campbell, CA

*P&D - One quick clarification on the War article. There was no direct comparison between the news service and the WWF. Rather, the news services were used to illustrate the point that some people will profit from the war while providing a useful, laudable service to the public. But, don't believe for a minute that the networks, CNN and the local radio and television stations are losing money as a result of the war. Short-term, perhaps, and they may show decreased profits during the first quarter of 1991, but radio and television broadcasters are owned by businesses who are using the license to make money. The owners have seen the long term public relations benefits possible from the short-term sacrifice of the first quarter earnings. CNN not only will benefit in the long run, but in the short run as well. It has raised its advertising rates because it is delivering more households and it is also attempting to raise the per subscriber charge to the*

*cable systems that carry it. Broadcasting is a business, no matter who may say otherwise. Regarding newspapers, most reported increased circulation numbers as people searched for any information regarding the Persian Gulf crisis. Dozens of papers put out special editions and most will profit from the war.*

The "War" article is an excellent thorough piece with many valid points. Too often people want to view issues concerning morality in black and white terms, ignoring the gray areas completely.

It is true that the promoters have the choice of whether or not to exploit the suffering of others to turn a profit. It is already being done on television and the movies, as you pointed out; however, there remains one basic difference. Everyone knows that movies are fantasy, but not everyone knows that wrestling is.

As "smart" fans, we realize that wrestling is purely entertainment, and if a promoter thinks there is a demand for a certain type of character he may elect to provide it. We realize that Sgt. Slaughter couldn't speak to Saddam Hussein even if he wanted to. We also realize that when Hogan defeats Slaughter he will not be claiming a victory for America, but making a mockery of those who are risking their lives for us.

What about those who believe that wrestling is real? Promoters know that these people exist, whether they be children, the uneducated or the uninformed. They are being told that Sgt. Slaughter is a traitor to our country. Surely this is more harmful than watching a movie. These people can go to an arena and actually see Sgt. Slaughter in person, perhaps believing that he might in some way be responsible for the deaths of Americans in the Persian Gulf. I think that McMahon is treading on hazardous (and unknown) territory by promoting a pro-Iraqi heel during wartime. As you stated in your article, it is no less moral to promote him during the war than after the war, just more dangerous. Patriotic fervor is at an all-time high as well as anti-Iraqi sentiment and people are dying now.

Someday, someone is going to want to do something about it and they might see Slaughter as an easy target. Hopefully, this will never happen.

In conclusion, I think that the same standards should be applied to any exploitation in wrestling, whether it be the war, racism or sexism. There are people who believe that wrestling is real and the exploitation of society's evils in any way can only cause the problems to grow. It is time for the promoters to start making the right choices.

Nannette McCormick  
Watertown, NY

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Wrestling Perspective  
PO Box 401  
Camillus, NY 13031-0401